The Fourth Church Pulpit

THE POWER OF A NAME

November 26, 1995

John M. Buchanan

Who am I?

Who am I?
They mock me,
these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am,
Thou knowest, O God,
I am thine.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut Street Chicago IL 60611-2094
Phone: (312) 787-4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

The Nameless Woman in Luke 8

When I pushed through the crowd,
jostled, bumped, elbowed by the curious
who wanted to see what everyone else
was so excited about,
all I could think of was my pain
and that perhaps if I could touch him,
this man who worked miracles,
cured diseases,
even those as foul as mine,
I might find relief.
I was tired from hurting,
exhausted, revolted by my body,
unfit for any man, and yet not let loose
from desire and need. I wanted to rest,
to sleep without pain or filthiness or torment.
I don't really know why
I thought he could help me
when all the doctors
with all their knowledge
had left me still drained
and bereft of all that makes
a woman's life worth living.
Well: I'd seen him with some children
and his laughter was quick and merry
and reminded me of when I was young and well,
though he looked tired; and he was as old as I am.
Then there was that leper,
but lepers have been cured before —

No, it wasn't the leper, or the man cured of palsy,
or any of the other stories of miracles,
or at any rate that was the least of it;
I had been promised miracles too often.
I saw him ahead of me in the crowd
and there was something in his glance
and in the way his hand rested briefly
on the matted head of a small boy
who was getting in everybody's way,
and I knew that if only I could get to him,
not to bother him, you understand,
not to interrupt, or to ask him for anything,
not even his attention,
just to get to him and touch him ...

I didn't think he'd mind, and he needn't even know.
I pushed through the crowd
and it seemed that they were deliberately
trying to keep me from him.
I stumbled and fell and someone stepped
on my hand and I cried out
and nobody heard. I crawled to my feet
and pushed on and at last I was close,
so close I could reach out
and touch with my fingers
the hem of his garment.

Have you ever been near
when lightning struck?
I was, once, when I was very small
and a summer storm came without warning
and lightning split the tree
under which I had been playing
and I was flung right across the courtyard.
That's how it was.
Only this time I was not the child
but the tree
and the lightning filled me.
He asked, "Who touched me?"
and people dragged me away, roughly,
and the men around him were angry at me.

"Who touched me?" he asked.
I said, "I did, Lord,"
So that he might have the lightning back
which I had taken from him when I touched
his garment's hem.
He looked at me and I knew then
that only he and I knew about the lightning.
He was tired and emptied
but he was not angry.
He looked at me
and the lightning returned to him again,
though not from me, and he smiled at me
and I knew that I was healed.
Then the crowd came between us
and he moved on, taking the lightning with him,
perhaps to strike again.

[L'Engle, Madeline, *The Irrational Season*, pp. 125-126]

Scripture
Luke 1:57-66
Luke 8:40-56

"He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well.'"
Luke 8:48 (NRSV)

She has no name, this woman who boldly interrupts Jesus while he is on an urgent mission. She is an interruption to the main story which is about Jairus, a man with a name and a title — leader of the synagogue. Everyone knows Jairus. He is respected, admired. He also has a very sick 12-year-old daughter. In fact, she is dying and so Jairus does what any parent would do: he has heard about Jesus healing the sick, finds him, falls at his feet, begs him to come to his sick daughter.

Jesus agrees to go. The crowd which had come out to welcome him is pressing in on him with understandable concern, anticipation and, of course, curiosity as the entourage heads for Jairus' house.

And then this urgent mission is interrupted, brought to a halt. A nameless woman somehow manages to squeeze through the crowd and coming up from behind, not facing him, but behind, discreetly, quietly, secretly reaches out, touches his garment — just the fringe.

Who was she — this presumptuous woman with no name?

She was, in a sense, an ultimate outsider, a quintessential nobody. She had no name because her culture had decided that she was a non-person. She had suffered, Luke says, from hemorrhages for twelve years. That delicate, clinical detail is important because in her culture her physical condition has rendered her unfit for human contact of any kind. Her condition is described in the Book of Leviticus, the third book of the Law, the 15th chapter, the 25th verse, as impurity, uncleanness — in her case permanently, for twelve years. There were ritual, social, personal implications. Everything she touched was unclean. Anyone who touched anything she touched — her bed, her cloak, the bowl she ate from — was unclean. She was, by reason of her physical condition, an ultimate pariah. A normal relationship with a man was out of the question. If she had a family, they could have nothing to do with her. In all probability she lived alone.

This is who interrupts Jesus on his way to deal with an urgent crisis involving the daughter of a prominent citizen of the community. The contrasts could not be more dramatic: a man with name recognition — a woman with no name; a man with a title, a position — a woman who is unfit, unclean, untouchable.

The legal and social dimensions of this brief encounter are that Jesus becomes contaminated and unclean when she touches the fringe of his robe. The law is clear. He is unclean and he must stop what he is doing, bathe in water, wash his clothes and remove himself from contact with the community until sundown. This is becoming a major problem: there is a sick little girl waiting; Jesus is now unclean. So she's trembling and falling down in humility, now utterly exposed. She tells her story and Jesus, in one of the most revolutionary sentences in the context of that culture — that time — says: "Daughter, your faith has made you well."

And then, now virtually unclean himself, he resumes his original mission, goes to Jairus' house in spite of the fact that the little girl has already died; reassures her parents, takes the girl by the hand, orders her to get up, which she does, directs her parents to give her something to eat.

There is something very important going on in this story which has implications and ramifications beyond the scope of the particular characters.

New Testament scholars help us see beneath the surface of this text. Marcus Borg says that Jesus has chosen the occasion to speak a word which has very real political and social meanings. Jesus, Borg says, when he deals with this woman, and, essentially ignores her uncleanliness, is engaging in civil disobedience, challenging the very basic organizing principle of life for his people and their culture. That principle, described in infinitesimal detail in the

Old Testament, is called the Holiness Code. Holiness is based on purity. It defines all of life, assigns a place for everything and every person and every experience. It served Israel well for many centuries. Everyone knew that the purity laws were the reason Israel had survived.

What is going on in this story, and consistently in the teaching and ministry of Jesus, is a direct challenge to the Holiness Code and an intentional substitution of another organizing principle for holiness/purity, namely compassion. Borg writes:

> "In the message and activity of Jesus, we see an alternative social vision: 'Whereas purity divides and excludes, compassion unites and includes.' Compassion for Jesus was political." [*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time,* pp. 49, 53, 58]

Walter Brueggemann agrees that there is a political challenge here, but the story is also about deeply personal conversion. Jesus is inviting the woman to change the way she thinks about herself; to abandon the old "script" and imagine a new one. That's what religion is for, Brueggemann teaches. The children of Israel in bondage know themselves to be captives, slave labor, until they hear a word from God that assures them that the script is wrong. They are not slaves; they are God's children and therefore free. The woman in the story lives by a script which says she is unclean, dirty, unfit, guilty, until she hears a redeeming word that says "you are whole," and her life literally is saved.

The word for that, says Brueggemann, is "conversion": the moment when a person abandons the old script, hears a word from God and says "Yes, this is who I am — a son/daughter of God. Now I have a new name." [*Theology Today*, October 1995]

Names are part of the script. Names are powerful. They define us, how we think about ourselves, and how we live our lives. When a newborn life is in danger, parents often feel the need to give the baby a name, almost as if giving a name is giving life.

Madeleine L'Engle says somewhere that her name, Madeleine, is her personal possession and she doesn't like it when strangers use it before she has consented to that level of intimacy. I'm always taken aback a bit when the person on the other end of the line, who doesn't know me, uses my first name:

> "Whom may I say is calling?"
> "John Buchanan."
> "He'll be with you in a minute, John."
> "Wait a minute; we've never even met."

Or the easy intimacy of telemarketing. The phone rings at 9:50 p.m.: "Hi, John, you can order the *Tribune* for three months at half price ..." Or in the mail, "Mr John Buchanan has been selected to be a winner of the *Reader's Digest* Sweepstakes ..." One of the saddest duties I ever had to perform was to come home from work and explain the facts of life to a fifth-grader who had received a notice that he had just won eight million dollars from *Reader's Digest* — with his own name on it.

The elderly, when they put themselves in the care of retirement homes, sometimes experience a loss of identity. And part of it is the easy use of their first names by staff persons a third their age who address them as Mary or Bea or worse yet, "honey" or "sweetie."

I love the story William Willimon tells about his mother, a woman in her eighties, who had received a letter from her church which began "Dear Sarah" and was signed "Tom." She called Willimon, Chaplain at Duke University, and told him about this peculiar piece of mail. "I don't know anyone well enough down there anymore who can call me by my first name. And I don't know a Tom." Her son patiently explained that the church had a new computer and was trying to be more personal by using first names, and that Tom was actually The Reverend Thomas D. Smith, her pastor. "My mother was not amused," Willimon reported.

Names are powerful. They are part of the script that defines us. When we have no name, we have no self, in a sense. Some names we have been called can be demeaning, oppressive. Think of the names we use to hurt: fatty — dumb — stupid — idiot — kike — nigger — spic.

In his powerful book about the children of the South Bronx, *Amazing Grace,* Jonathan Kozol describes life in the poorest neighborhood in the country. It's not an easy book to read. Kozol's thesis is that American society generally, and New York City specifically, conspires to keep its poorest, weakest, sickest isolated in ghettoes where chances for escape are very slim and where all the reasons people live there in the first place get worse. Ghetto people — simply because of where they live — get sicker, weaker, poorer, and society becomes more resolved to preserve the isolation.

As a result of this dynamic there is a modern plague running rampant through the ghetto, a catastrophe that has no real analogy in our nation. 10,000 children in the South Bronx have lost their mothers to AIDS. By the year 2000, HIV infected mothers will have 32,000 to 38,000 HIV infected children. At this very moment we are seriously proposing reducing available public funds for public health care, public hospitals, and a whole variety of systems desperately trying to cope with this complicated plague, and we are looking at a nightmare, worse than anything that has ever happened in this nation, a kind of ultimate denial that those people even exist.

It is a grim topic in a very grim book and when it becomes too much for him, Kozol says he tries to find a reason to visit the elementary school where the children he is studying and interviewing attend. He writes:

> "When I look through my notes after a day like this, I'm often fascinated by the names of many of the young black children I have met ... Some are African names, as well as poetically invented names that have an African sound, Shaneeka, Jowanda, Kadeesha. Increasingly, biblical names have become popular."

The names symbolize a wish to mark a new departure from the bitterness or sorrow of the past. Kozol recalls African-American children named Charity, Prudence, Felicity and Easter — whose mother said, "She was born in spring and I was prayin' for a better life."

In one of the poorest homes he found a child named Precious. When he asked how the name was chosen, her mother said: "When I was pregnant, I said to God, 'I want a pretty little girl who has long hair, and I don't want no dummy.' He gave me exactly what I ordered ... You got to be specific. One time I asked God for a handsome man and that's exactly what I got — handsome and nothin' else. No brains, no money, no religion. So I said next time I got to be specific." Precious.

Another little one is called Blessing. "I have the highest hopes for her," her grandmother said. [p. 193-203]

The power of a name.

One day a nameless woman made her way through a crowd and got close enough to Jesus to reach out and touch him. What do you suppose made her do that? Don't you suppose that she had run out of other options, that the position her culture and religion put her in gave her no choices other than disguising herself in the anonymity of a crowd, hoping against hope that a chance encounter, just a touch of his robe, might somehow make a difference and break through the socially and religiously mandated barrier that condemned her to live in a hell of isolation and shame?

One thing was certain: she couldn't face him, couldn't approach him face to face as other people were doing, couldn't simply walk up and say, "Rabbi, I have a problem and I hope you will help me," as Jairus did. Religious law and social custom would not allow her to get that close. Religion and tradition already condemned her.

And so it was a powerful moment when, from out of the crowding, pressing throng of people, her hand brushed his garment, and the power that went out of him was none other than the power of God, the power of creation that hovers over formless chaos and creates a world out of nothing, the power that converges with human love and

passion to create new life: the power that here breaks through a cruel social and religious barrier and creates a new person. The woman was healed, and did you notice, she receives a name — a name as powerful as "Precious" or "Blessing"? Jesus said: "*Daughter*, Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace."

There are a lot of people like her, I think, maybe even you: following Jesus from a distance, looking on wistfully as he does apparently wonderful things for other people. And what keeps many people away is what kept her away: a name, a conclusion reinforced over the years that you are not good enough for religion, that you are not acceptable, that you have never lived up to the expectations others had for you and you adopted therefore as your own, and so you have made a very bad bargain with life to live in a lonely isolation, never getting close to anyone, never walking up to Jesus or anyone else for that matter, and asking for help, because you know you are not good enough.

Maybe, like her, organized religion has turned you off and turned you away. Maybe it was the church that told you you don't measure up, you are not welcome or acceptable. Maybe, like her, your isolation is a result of observing religious people construct barriers around the good news of God's grace until it seems, at least, that they have concluded that they own it and have the right to distribute it to whomever they decide is acceptable.

There are reasons to believe that this isolated woman is no stranger in our world. Malcolm Boyd wrote a collection of prayers a number of years ago which became a means of grace for many of us, *Are You Running With Me, Jesus?* "I wasn't going to get lonely any more, and so I kept very busy, telling myself I was serving you. But it's getting dark again, and I'm alone: honestly Lord, I'm lonely as hell. Take hold of me, Jesus." [p. 14]

For centuries, Christian people have been engaged in a theological conversation about grace, about how it is we finally encounter the reality of God's love in Jesus Christ. Is it our initiative or is it God's? Is our search, our longing, our reaching out stimulated by God's spirit? Is our search actually God's search for us? That important conversation has been going on for centuries and many of us could add a chapter or two out of our own experience. But, do notice that this woman has to, in some way, get herself to a place where she can touch Jesus — which for her is a moment of shattering power. She has to reach out and in the reaching make herself accessible to God's powerful, redeeming, re-creating love. She has to reach out in order for grace to touch her.

And that is what I invite you to do this morning.

It may mean deciding to do something unlikely — like joining this Church.

It may mean deciding simply to come back to try it again next Sunday.

It may mean going home and stepping forward and joining a Christian church wherever you are.

It may mean simply going home to those who love you and care about you and whose grace you need to be whole.

It may mean deciding to tutor a child, or spend an evening in jail, or cook a meal, or write a check.

It may mean starting all over again.

I invite you, in whatever way is appropriate, to reach out your hand across whatever barrier keeps you away from the help, the love, the grace you need.

When you do, you will hear your name — Daughter — Son — Child of God.

Amen.